

FEATURED AUTHOR—ALBERT STEWART

Albert Stewart, Patron Saint of Appalachian Writers (1914-2001)

Barbara Smith

A photograph was taken of Albert Stewart soon after he arrived at Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, Kentucky, in 1918. In the picture he is five years old. Wearing an oversized fedora and a crumpled jacket, he is hunched over on a curb, his hands limp in his lap. He is alone.

When Albert was two, his mother, Lucinda Sparkman Stewart, died following the birth of a stillborn baby. Years later, he remembered thinking that she was asleep. He tried to wake her, but a family member came and led him away. As he told Kevin Nance in an interview published in the February 14, 1993, issue of the *Lexington-Herald Leader*, “I guess I’ve cried, in some ways, ever since.” He was asked if, as an adult, he ever felt lonely living alone in the old family home. “I get lonesome,” he said, “but shoot, I’ve been getting lonesome all my life.”

At two, Albert, the youngest of the Stewart brood, was without a mother. After several years of struggle, his father, William, took him from Yellow Mountain to live with the “quare women” at the settlement school some three miles away. The youngest child ever to board at the settlement school, and even though several siblings were fellow students, Albert undoubtedly missed his adored father, his home, his mountain. Albert had seven living siblings—two brothers—Bert and Sidney—and five sisters—Laura, Nancy, Maude and Marie (twins), and Mavis. Mavis was the only child of William’s second marriage, which had occurred when Albert was three. Mavis, in turn, had two children, Rudolph and Alice Faye, who still live up the road from the old Stewart home. Because of the large size of the Stewart family, Albert eventually had many cousins and many other nieces and nephews.

The move to the Settlement School was good for young Albert. He thrived in the care of Lucy Furman, who became Albert’s surrogate mother. She was the housemother for the boarding boys and was responsible for all of the outdoor work at the school, which depended upon its students to tend the farm, clean the buildings, prepare the

meals and create craft items for sale. Learning took place around the clock, and Albert was a learner.

By the time Albert arrived at Hindman, the school was complete—225 acres of land, 20 buildings, a staff of 29, and some 100 boarders. There was even a hospital on the grounds. Lucy Furman had already been there for twelve years and was to stay at least eight more, during which she wrote novels using Hindman as the setting. *Lonesome Road* was written during a winter which she and Albert, then nine years old, spent in Florida. From her, Stewart acquired his love of literature and music, and it was at Hindman that he developed his lifelong love of nature and his keen insight into human beings. The school was the center of the community and sponsored at least two weekly “socials.” There were clubs for youth and adults, open classes in crafts, homemaking, carpentry, and other practical skills. There was also a lending library.

Albert grew. After completing his early years at the settlement school, he went on through the high school curriculum and was admitted to Berea College, where he began writing. He went on to earn a master’s degree at the University of Kentucky and did work toward a doctorate, which he never completed. He worked in a bank, in the coal mines and on farms. During World War II, he spent three years in the South Pacific as a naval officer. Then he came home. He married and divorced twice, having two sons, Michael and Charles, who were born to his first wife, Jane. His second wife, Judy Henke Stewart, lives in Cincinnati and comes back occasionally to visit the homeplace and relatives.

Over the years, Stewart taught at Caney Junior College, at Morehead State College, and in the English Department at Alice Lloyd College from 1964 to 1976. While living in a faculty-designated log cabin there in Pippa Passes, he founded the Appalachian Writers Workshop, the first session of which was held several miles away at Hindman Settlement School late in the summer of 1977. It still thrives under the leadership of Mike Mullins and is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year. Stewart also initiated workshops at Morehead and at Longwood College in Virginia. At Morehead, he established “Inscape,” a student literary and arts magazine. His first collection of poetry, *The Untoward Hills*, was published at that time—1962.

Throughout all of his adult years, Albert Stewart mentored—and inspired—countless aspiring writers, including some who did not know they were aspiring until he touched their lives. He founded the prestigious literary journal *Appalachian Heritage* at Alice Lloyd College

in 1972 and edited it for twelve years. In it he published and thereby encouraged scores of Appalachian writers, some already established, some upcoming.

The inaugural issue of *A Ride on the Mantrip* in 1986 featured Albert, who had inspired the initiation of this oral history magazine at Wheelwright High School. This edition included a copy of “Man of Circumstance,” which became the title poem of Stewart’s 1996 book. In an interview for the Wheelwright publication, the poet said that his writing was “more than a hobby” but was, instead, “a religious experience.” Quoting Isak Dinesen, he said, “You write because you owe God an answer.”

When asked during that interview how a poem comes to be written, Albert Stewart suggested, “It isn’t easy, although the process is a high of devotion and concentrated excitement. It begins with some rather unexplainable condition of desire guided by something like intuition and inspiration. It knows where it’s going, even though it must find its way through trial and error, choice and discard, shape and reshape, drawing in verbal material, figures of speech, images, ideas, that eventually form into an experience and statement about the nature of the world, and establishes, as Robert Frost said, ‘a momentary stay against confusion.’”

Through the decade of the 1970s, Al Stewart waged war with the state of Kentucky, trying to save his family’s land—originally some 200 acres, some of which were reportedly secured in a trade for a hog rifle—from being bisected by Highway 80.

He finally lost that battle but succeeded in having his grandfather’s house—over 120 years old—moved to where it now is, located in what Albert called his “kingdom.” The lushly lined road leading to the house is posted as “Stewart Fork.” Until his death, he lived there with his books and his poetry and his cats and his gardens. Originally several acres of corn and tomatoes, beans and squash and strawberries, the gardens shrank as Albert aged. According to Stewart’s own words in *The Holy Season*, his great-uncle, “Preacher Jim Stewart,” had surveyed and patented that kingdom.

In the foreword to that book, Albert indicated how proud he was of his heritage, of his great-grandfather, “Old Charlie,” who moved to Knott from Knox County, and of his grandfather Jasper, who acquired Yellow Mountain in 1859 and was the first physician in the area. Jasper Stewart built the family home on Yellow Mountain in the year the Civil War ended. Other ancestors served as teachers and preachers. “I once pondered,” Stewart said, “what my immediate ancestors would have

thought of a descendant who...aspired to be a poet....Would they think of him as a freak of nature? An anachronism? A throw-back? If so, a throw-back to what? What of old William Charlie, the bear killer? What of Jasper Byrd, the deer slayer? It...helped to learn that another Scottish Stewart was represented in a reputable anthology of Scottish poetry." The Stewart house and land were willed to the University of Kentucky with the proviso that the trees and minerals never be harvested. Albert is buried in the family cemetery on Yellow Mountain, across the highway from Stewart Fork and his beloved family home.

He was proud, too, of the settlement school, whose founders were May Stone and Katherine Pettit and whose stated purpose was "to bring the strong, wealthy, and learned Kentuckians into healthful touch with the poorest, most ignorant, and humblest mountaineer and at the same time make the one appreciate the vitalizing, strengthening influence of the other." *The Quare Women's Journals* also includes a statement made by May Stone following a survey in 1930. She reported that 85 percent of Hindman graduates remained in the region, thereby enriching the area. A prime example of the contribution of these graduates to their homeland was Carl Perkins, a native of Hindman and a graduate of the settlement school, who served thirty-six years in the United States House of Representatives. Albert Stewart was in very good company.

Stewart was never a churchman, but he was deeply spiritual. He suggested his theology in the *Lexington Herald-Leader* review by Kevin Nance. "You don't meet God face to face unless you meet him in you." Albert went on to say that his was "not the Christian religion, but rather untraditional. God reveals himself in symbols and images, most of them mysterious....I have been privileged," he said, "to look into the eyes of holy fire."

In that article, Nance also offered evidence of Stewart's sense of humor. "I watch anything, everything: birds, animals, even people," the poet said. There were not many people to observe from the porch of his ancestral home, but he kept a pair of binoculars handy to keep in touch with the animals and birds. He also kept a good supply of books. His poetry, as indicated in the Summer 1995 issue of *Appalachian Journal*, shows the influence of British and American Romanticism and its view of nature as sacred. Stewart could spontaneously quote from Wordsworth and Blake, but he also knew well the work of Melville and Emerson and Thoreau, and he could quote from the Bible, both Old Testament and New.

In addition to being a naturalist, a home-grown philosopher, and a poet of exceptional ability, Albert Stewart was an artist and musician. He designed and built dulcimers, and he created art pieces from natural objects—wood, leaves, flowers—whatever he found to admire and share. Appreciated primarily in his home territory, his beloved Kentucky, he was named a Berea College Distinguished Alumnus in 1993. In 1995, Morehead State University designated him an Appalachian Treasure. He earned the Stylus Award in poetry at the University of Kentucky. In 1991 he and his grandfather Jasper were named to the Knott County Hall of Fame. His first book, *The Untoward Hills*, was included in “1963 Masterplots Annual 100 Outstanding Books of the Year” and was listed as a “landmark” book in the Parks and Edwards *Appalachian Calendar*. In the Spring/Summer 1985 issue of *Kentucky Poetry Review* which featured him, Stewart said, “Poets differ from others not in being moved by the world in which they live, but in being further moved to order experience into a special significance by means of words. A poem should be considered one of man’s most vital undertakings.”

Critics have noted that Albert Stewart published only three books, the first in 1962, the third in 1996. But according to Albert, every good poem, in terms of thought and effort, is equal to a novel—or more. And, in spite of a few negative comments, which Stewart privately questioned, those same critics noted the high quality of his work. For instance, Kevin Nance said in his review of Stewart’s second book, *The Holy Season*, “If the purpose of literature is to unify a fragmented world and discover its relation to the self, Stewart...has taken a more ambitious stab at it than most....*The Holy Season* contains a dozen or so of the most deeply felt and most flat-out beautiful poems you will ever read. Nothing has prepared us for the haunting mysticism, the stunned witness, the sheer gorgeousness of some of his poems.” Karen Kay Jones wrote in the *Troublesome Creek Times* front-page obituary, “Albert’s poems spoke most eloquently of the beautiful things he found in his native hills, of the lessons he learned and the people he encountered in his life’s journeys....To those who read his work, Albert was a brilliant man—his poetry exquisitely crafted, reflecting keen observation of people, animals, plants—all the world around him. Perhaps most importantly, his words came not just from his head, but his heart.” James Gage, in the Spring 2001 issue of *Appalachian Heritage*, said, “After coming back to live in Hindman, Stewart became a significant poet and had major influence in the Appalachian Region as a citizen, teacher, activist, and editor.” Stewart was preparing fourth and fifth collections of his work when he died in 2001.

This poet was also a world traveler, mainly in books but also under the aegis of the U.S. Navy and at least once on his own initiative. He joined a group of students from Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia and went to England. Accompanying the group to concerts and museums, he also ventured on his own to special destinations. For instance, he wanted to see the ancient carved White Horse near Uffington Castle in Oxfordshire. There he met Englishman George Alexander, who later visited him at Yellow Mountain and participated in the writers workshop. That contact was typical of many. Quietly, modestly, Albert Stewart had friends all over the world.

In spite of his sterling reputation, Stewart never belonged to the Academy of American Poets. He never subscribed to *Poets and Writers*, nor is he listed in their directory. He never did readings in New York or London or San Francisco. There is no listing for him in the extensive Internet source, Wikipedia. Nevertheless, in several published sources, including the Nance article, Stewart has been described as “one of America’s most noteworthy poets” and as “the patron saint of two generations of Kentucky writers.” From the viewpoint of those of us who knew Albert Stewart and who have treasured his work and who have benefited from his friendship and his wisdom, Billy C. Clark sums it up: “There’s not a Kentuckian who ever lived that’s touched more writers’ lives than Al Stewart....Al is the greatest poet Kentucky has ever produced.”

Anyone who reads the work of Albert Stewart will hear his voice in many of his poems, but those who knew him best find him in every line. Perhaps most revealing of the man, and most often chosen as his own favorites are “A Man of Circumstance,” “Lesson in Biology,” “Arbutus,” “Deptford Pinks,” “Deer Meadow,” “The Size of It,” and “Mountain Child.”